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SUBJECT: TAJIK ISLAMIC LEADER POINTS OUT WEAKNESSES IN CENTRAL ASIA

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¶1. (U) Summary: At an April 5 conference on "Kazakhstan's Role and Place in Central Asia" participants took a few gentle stabs at the United States, particularly over the security situation in Afghanistan but otherwise remained neutral. Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) leader Muhiddin Kabiri commented that the true difficulty in integrating the region was the presence of authoritarian leaders in Central Asia, who would never cede power to a larger entity.

¶2. (U) Erlan Abildaev, the Kazakh Ambassador to Tajikistan, opened the conference at the President's Center for Strategic Research by highlighting the dynamic and growing relations between Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. He commented that both countries faced common threats of narcotics and extremism, and that Kazakhstan was ready and willing to expand relations with Tajikistan as the economic leader of the region to help mitigate these threats. Abildaev added that Kazakhstan was politically stable, with gender equality, and a safe place to invest money. Kazakhstan was working to diversify its economy. He added that it was important for Kazakhstan and Tajikistan to expand their relations since they "needed each other," and since Kazakhstan had large reserves of oil and gas, and Tajikistan has great hydropower potential. Abildaev also reported that Kazakhstan was in the process of legalizing a migrant strategy for those Tajiks who were beginning to move to Kazakhstan as migrant workers -- a policy that could benefit both countries.

¶3. (U) Abdunabi Sattarov, Assistant Director of the Center for Strategic Research, highlighted the fact that while the Central Asian republics participated in organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Organization for Collective Security, there currently did not exist a body that consisted of only the Central Asian states. He commented that such an organization would be helpful to better coordinate and integrate their activities. While most participants viewed integration in a positive way, one professor stated his view that integration would mean "death" for Tajikistan.

¶4. (U) The most interesting comments of the day came from Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) leader Muhiddin Kabiri, who observed that Central Asia still faced problems of authoritarianism; interestingly, he provided some rare words of praise for the late President Niyazov of Turkmenistan, aka "Turkmenbashi." Though he was not a perfect President, according to Kabiri, he provided his people with free water and gas, fulfilled his promises and "was honest with his people." Kabiri commented that Kazakhstan was also the only country in

Central Asia that was thinking about its future, helped by the fact that the country had an adequate number of intellectuals and elites to comprehend and solve their problems. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, on the contrary, were still arguing with one another over which was a better and more important country - an attitude that impeded solving their current problems. He believed that integration of Central Asia would be difficult, since most Central Asian leaders were more interested in ruling their own countries, and were not willing to cede power to a larger entity. These leaders did not recognize the threats that narcotics or extremism posed to their countries; rather, these authoritarian rulers were more concerned about stifling new ideas that could threaten their grip on power.

15. (U) Kabiri further added that countries currently investing in Tajikistan, including China, Russian, Iran and the United States were investing political capital, rather than humanitarian assistance. He specifically stated that the United States was solely building the Pyanj River bridge "to connect Tajikistan to its allies," and did not have the interests of the Tajik people at heart. He ended his presentation by stating that democracy did not currently exist in Tajikistan -- only an "imitation of democracy."

16. (U) Despite Kabiri's blunt remarks regarding the current absence of democracy in Tajikistan, the Tajik government officials present allowed him to speak and did not attempt to refute him. When one professor attempted to challenge Kabiri on one of his points, the moderator cut him off, and stated, "Historians and politicians are always free to express their own opinions." The conference was overall neutral towards U.S. policy in the region, despite a few gentle stabs against the security situation in Afghanistan. Several speakers questioned whether or not the U.S. would fail in Afghanistan as the Soviets had (when Tajikistan was part of the Soviet Union), but most acknowledged that Tajikistan wanted stability in Afghanistan to prevent the Taliban from establishing positions closer to their border. Also of note, several presenters made repeated

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17. (U) Comment: Tajikistan has had a rash of conferences of late, many commemorating 15 years of independence, but few lead to real dialogue or honest exchanges of opinion. Kabiri's comments were remarkably candid for the setting. As the United States continues to push for regional integration, the Central Asians' own perspectives on the region are important to consider. End Comment.
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